

VA hospitals outscore private ones in surveys

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by Carolina Astigarraga

Duke University Hospital is known as one of the premier medical institutions in the world— and with its imposing glass facade and shiny exterior it certainly looks the part. But the modest red brick building across the street that houses the Durham Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center has been getting a lot of attention recently.

Two national surveys released this year by the American Customer Satisfaction Index indicate that patients rate the quality of care received at VA hospitals—facilities for honorably discharged veterans—higher than care received at private institutions like Duke Hospital. VA hospitals received an average score of 83 out of a possible 100 for inpatient care, while VA outpatient care received an average score of 80.

In a separate survey, patients gave inpatient care at private facilities a score of 73.

Outpatient care received a score of 75. The results represent the sixth consecutive year that VA hospitals have outranked private facilities.

Dr. Mike Cuffe, vice president for medical affairs for Duke University Health System, said the surveys conducted by the American Customer Satisfaction Index used measurement tools with which he was unfamiliar. He had no comment about the survey's findings.

Cuffe also said the survey compared VA hospitals to private hospitals and did not necessarily pertain to Duke Hospital as a member of the academic health system. "No doubt every hospital in the country including ours has room for improvement," he added.

Ralph Gigliotti, director of the Durham VA Medical Center, attributed the high ratings of VA hospitals in part to their integrated health care system and their electronic patient records.

"There's a definite continuity of care because of our automated medical record system. It's something we provide that most private health care systems can't match," he said.

Cuffe said DUHS has a similar electronic record system and is working to improve it. Gigliotti also cited patient surveys as important methods of providing quality care and patient satisfaction.

The Durham VA hospital uses patient surveys that rate satisfaction after a stay as well as "real time" surveys—handheld electronic devices that allow patients to rate care as they receive it. Gigliotti said patients' experiences are often made more enjoyable because of the fraternal bond between patients and doctors who are themselves veterans.

He added that the medical center is particularly proud to be the recipient of the Robert W. Carey Achievement Award, which recognizes quality-oriented VA facilities. "It shows the care our veterans receive is top notch," Gigliotti said. Durham VA Medical Center was selected from among 154 hospitals around the country as the facility with the best health care.

Cuffe said DUHS is constantly working to ensure a positive experience for its patients on a variety of levels. "When a patient comes in, they expect time and care to be focused on them from when they park their cars

to when they pay their bills months later,” Cuffe said. “The experience of the process is perhaps as important as the quality of medical care received.”

Duke Hospital tries to achieve this level of patient satisfaction through surveys that rate the patient’s overall experience. Patient advocacy boards also help integrate patients’ concerns into management decisions.

Duke uses a “Patients First” employee rewards program that gives year-end bonuses to employees who receive high marks from patients. Employees have access to an anonymous reporting system that allows them to comment on areas in patient care or hospital management that they think can be improved. “I want Duke to be the place where patients go for the best experience,” Cuffe said. “I want us to be known for excellent patient care—to be among the best in the country and certainly the best in the Triangle. It’s a big focus for us.”